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POLITICO

2012 map could be deja vu for Obama

Some political scientists and Democratic strategists believe it's now possible that President **Barack Obama** could replicate his break-out Electoral College map from 2008, with the exception of Indiana, even if the popular vote is closer than four years ago.

Based on a recent spate of public polls, **Mitt Romney** is currently trailing by as much as 10 points in Ohio (18 electoral votes), 9 points in Florida (29) and 8 points in Virginia (13). A loss of any of those three states — but especially Florida — would be a big blow and make the GOP nominee's path to 270 electoral votes much narrower.

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(**Also on POLITICO: 2012 swing-state map**)

Democratic strategist Tad Devine thinks Obama could win an Electoral College blowout if Romney doesn't turn his campaign around in **the first debate** this Wednesday in Denver.

"He's in a position to get close to 350 electoral votes, without a doubt," said Devine, who played key roles for Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004. "The president and his campaign successfully identified states where they could beat Romney, set out to define Romney in those places and did so well through the course of the spring and summer."

"It ain't pretty for Romney right now," Devine added. "He's in a precarious position."

Republicans, and the Romney campaign, fiercely dispute the public polling, insisting that it oversamples Democrats and that the race will tighten before Nov. 6. But after the nail-biter elections of 2000 and 2004 — and polls all year showing a close 2012 contest — there's now a plausible scenario in which the incumbent garners a healthy Electoral Vote majority.

(**Also on POLITICO: Right blogs challenge poll findings**)

"The bad news for Romney is his core states keep him under 200 electoral votes," said Carleton College political science professor Steven Schier. "It may well be that the time and investment both in shoe-leather, get-out-the-vote efforts, in media, in candidate visits, in advertising that Obama invested this summer in the key states may produce a firewall for the Electoral College in November."

In 2008, Obama carried nine states that George W. Bush won four years earlier. They are: Colorado (9), Florida (29), Indiana (11), Iowa (6), Nevada (6), New Mexico (5), North Carolina (15), Ohio (18) and Virginia (13). These are worth a total of 112 votes.

Ohio, Florida and Virginia amount to the lion's share of those votes at 58 and are a big part of Romney's current problem.

One of the nine Bush states Obama carried, New Mexico is so solid for Obama that the Republican National Committee recently diverted staff elsewhere. Indiana, meanwhile, looks safe for Romney.

(**Also on POLITICO: 2012 polling center**)

Of the remaining seven, the more historically conservative North Carolina is Romney's best pick-up opportunity. Obama won the state in 2008 by less than one-half of one percent — just 14,000 votes of 4.2 million cast — on a surge of African-

American turnout. But two polls conducted last week — including one by a Republican-aligned firm — gave the president a slight lead.

"I'm pretty confident if the election were held today, [Obama would] win everything but Indiana and North Carolina," said Tom Jensen, a Democratic pollster who runs Public Policy Polling. "He's got a cushion in all of them."

Jensen, who runs automated polls in many states that otherwise rarely get surveyed, said Obama is performing even better in the swing states that matter than nationally. Last Christmas, he was telling friends Obama had a 50-50 chance of winning. At the end of the GOP primaries, which bruised Romney, he said Obama had a 60-40 chance. Now he believes Obama has a 70 percent chance of winning.

"I never would have thought sitting here a year ago that we'd be talking on Sept. 26 about Obama nearly matching his 2008 numbers in every state," he said. "If Republicans had an average caliber candidate, this would be a 50-50 race. But they don't. So it's not."

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Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics, moved five states he's considered toss-ups to leans Democratic on Thursday: Iowa, Nevada, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin. That gives Obama 290 electoral votes, leaving Colorado, Florida and New Hampshire as toss-ups.

"Florida is absolutely essential. You can't even begin to get to 270 without Florida," Sabato said. "[Romney] has to win Virginia. How does he do it otherwise?"

"It's easy to imagine [Obama] getting well over 300 again. It could be 330, 340," Sabato added. "If it continues and if the debates change nothing and if the jobs numbers aren't 9 percent … then, yeah, it probably will be a big margin in the Electoral College."

The Romney camp is hoping to expand the 2008 map by adding at least one state — Wisconsin, with 10 electoral votes.

Obama won the state by 14 points in 2008 and no Republican has carried since Ronald Reagan, but it's a state Romney strategists remain hopeful about. Romney chose Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) as his running-mate, putting the state on the national

radar, and Obama campaigned there last weekend. The Republican National Committee's independent expenditure arm has reserved $4 million on broadcast in Wisconsin, Ohio and Virginia, according to a source tracking buys.

But a series of polls have put Obama ahead in the Badger State beyond the margin of error: an NBC/Marist/Wall Street Journal poll last week had Obama up 5 points and a CBS/New York Times/Quinnipiac poll the week before had the president ahead by 6 points.

"You can win any of these states," said Republican National Committee political director Rick Wiley. "We have six weeks to go, three debates out there and a ground game that's clicking on all cylinders. … In Florida, we're doing really well. We will win North Carolina. Virginia and Ohio will go right down to the wire."

Both campaigns have been unable to expand the map beyond the 2008 states that Obama won, plus Wisconsin.

Romney efforts to put Michigan (16) and Pennsylvania (20) in play — despite the fact that the GOP nominee campaigned in the Keystone State on Friday — have not paid dividends, and privately, Republicans don't think either will become competitive. Early Obama flirtations with Arizona and even Missouri or Georgia also never materialized.

In Pennsylvania, a Franklin and Marshall College poll released Wednesday showed Obama leading by nine points, 52 percent to 43 percent among likely voters. The state has attracted the attention of surrogates, but there have been few visits from the candidates themselves. Neither Romney, Obama nor their respective super PACs have advertised in the state for nearly a month.

"If the election were held today, and you look at the electoral map, it's hard [for Obama] not to get to 365," said G. Terry Madonna, who conducts the Franklin and Marshall poll. "They're close enough to cause everyone to pause … but we're also seeing far fewer undecideds than we have since 1996. … Most of us think … that something needs to happen that maybe is out of [Romney's] control."

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It remains true that an Electoral College landslide is not the same thing as a blowout in the popular vote. Even in 2008, Obama won 365 electoral votes at the same time

as he nabbed 52.9 percent of the popular vote. A bipartisan POLITICO poll released Monday shows Obama leading Romney by 3 percent nationally, which is within the margin of error.

Republican pollster Ed Goeas says polls should be weighted to reflect a balance of Bush-friendly 2004 turnout and Obama-skewed 2008 turnout, something POLITICO's Battleground poll does. He said the Washington Post's Ohio poll anticipates an even bigger share of Democratic voters than there were in 2008, something he believes is basically impossible. He says undecided voters break toward the challenger around this time, and he sees signs that's beginning to happen.

"There's a lot of what-if scenarios," said Goeas. "You could also end up with Romney winning every one of those states."

Election Day is just less than five weeks from now and much could change between now and then. The first debate is Wednesday in Denver. Romney and GOP outside groups still hold a funding edge that could tighten the margin in the race's final weeks. But early voting has already begun in some states, including Iowa on Thursday, which could blunt late Romney momentum.

Romney political director Rich Beeson told reporters this week that the campaign's internals look better than public polling, but he wouldn't say that the GOP nominee is actually leading in those places.

"We are by any stretch inside the margin of error in Ohio," he said. "Being from Colorado, we have a saying, 'If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes and it'll change.' If you don't like a poll coming out of a state, wait five minutes and you'll see one that you do like."

Obama strategists have regularly compared this cycle to 2004 and warned supporters the election will wind up close. They don't want them to become less energetic. Privately, they feel good.

Traveling Obama press secretary Jennifer Psaki said they'd prefer a path "where you can drive a mack truck through it and not a little scooter through it."

"We don't get too whipped up when we're up, we don't get too whipped up when we're down," she told reporters on Air Force One Wednesday. "As time progresses,

the field is looking like it's narrowing for them. In that sense, we'd rather be us than them."